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June 30, 2003

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### Making sense of science

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That's Kathleen Perkins' job at optics maker Breault Research Organization.

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#### EVENTS CALENDAR

By TEYA VITU

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Revlon. New York City. A boutique on Madison Avenue.

Those were the life and ambitions of Kathleen Perkins in the early 1990s.

When a cosmetics slump hit, Perkins packed her car and drove west to abandon cosmetics for high-tech optics.

She was headed to Tucson, based on advice from a man she had met a couple years earlier while haggling for a taxi at the airport.

"It was July 7, 1992. It was hot. Very hot," Perkins said of her first day in Tucson. She soon received another shock when she saw a javelina by her front door.

"I really thought I would do it for a year," she said.

Perkins, 44, had lived her entire student life in Philadelphia, graduating from St. Joseph's University. Her post-college life kept her in New York City for nine years, working from the ground up at Revlon, ultimately as a regional sales and marketing director covering Maine to Florida.

"I started at the bottom, spraying perfume through the stores - Bloomingdale's, Saks, Wanamaker's," she said.

Until March, marketing was her career, even in Tucson, first at LightPath Technologies, and since 1995 at Breault Research Organization. Chairman Bob Breault, the tireless booster of Tucson as Optics Valley - a term he and Perkins concocted - promoted his vice president of marketing to chief executive officer.

"When push comes to shove in the best interest for the company, she really pushed," Breault said. "She's always thinking in possibilities. She is certainly going to run a tighter ship. I'm process oriented. She is 'Are you executing the process?' We will be on a financial better footing."

Breault had run his \$7 million company without a CEO since 1997, but frequent travels - eight trips around the world last year - made it ineffective to have 17 people reporting to him.

BRO designs and sells optical software. BRO engineers also use the in-house software to design optics-related products, including all light devices in automobiles - headlights, tail lights, cabin lights, dashboard lights and more. BRO handles many other optics projects for defense industries and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and the Tucson company also supplied technology for the orbiting Hubble telescope.

"A call just came from a law enforcement agency that wants to upgrade its night vision," she said.

Perkins' role as CEO is to add business **sense** to a **science**-heavy company.

"We are truly international, technically ahead of the curve, but it is not a straight line to profitability," Perkins said. "I want to organize this company so it is extremely profitable and strong. Bob will try many avenues. My vision is more focused on the core business. More stability gives us a war chest, and then we can evaluate what the market needs.

"There's such a scientific emphasis in the company that I want to focus on everyone thinking about the customer of that day and getting paid well for our efforts. I think we have to be more conscious of the market place."

Breault and Al Greynolds, vice president of research at BRO, called her into Breault's office in December and gave no reason.

"We were having our largest volume ever," Perkins recalled. "I'm superbusy, and Bob wants to talk to me. I said, 'Can you make it quick?' They laughed. 'Do you want to be CEO?'"

"I didn't say 'yes' quickly or easily. I thought I could take what Bob built and add some critical things to it. I'm very focused. I'm a list maker. I like to accomplish things."



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She became CEO March 31 and is featured in this month's Opto and Laser Europe magazine. Perkins' first encounter with Breault a couple years earlier was no less off-the-wall.

"I met Bob early on," Perkins said. "He said to me, 'So, you're from New York. I need help with an optics meeting.' He was a very nice man. How hard could this be?"

This brought Perkins in at the ground level as Breault sought to bring optics companies in the state together to former an industry association, a cluster. It was the birth of the cluster concept in Tucson, which has led to industry groupings in aerospace, information technology, environmental technology, plastics and bioindustry.

After a career in cosmetics, optics has become Perkins' passion. She promotes BRO, she promotes the local optics cluster, and she publishes the OpticsReport newsletter, which highlights early-stage optics research.

"You have to manage the light in the system," she said in defining optics. "You have a system. You have to figure out how much light to get in and get out. Software controls the light. Think of your car as an illuminating vehicle. Your car is full of light. When you want to curve a reflector, there's implications to that."

Gaining the title of CEO was not in Perkins' game plan as a young adult. Nor was leaving the East Coast for Tucson.

"I always saw myself in business but not as a corporate CEO. No. I anticipated having my own business. I thought I was going to have a boutique on Madison Avenue some day.

"I was very satisfied with my life in New York. Then the cosmetics industry went into a downturn. I was in my early 30s. I found large retail companies were in bankruptcy."

"Through a chance meeting, there was a gentleman at the airport. He couldn't get a cab. I got a cab. We shared the ride. He turns out to be a technology consultant. He said, 'Why don't you apply yourself to technology?' He kept saying, 'Why not use your brain? You have a good mind.' "

Later, this same cab mate referred her to LightPath in Tucson. Soon thereafter Perkins got the invitation from Breault to set up a meeting bringing together optics entrepreneurs and scientists.

Twelve people showed up. Perkins was devastated. She revised her plan and drew 65 people to the second meeting.

"How did I do that?" she said, smiling broadly. "I called their wives and kids."

PHOTO CREDIT: FRANCISCO MEDINA/Tucson Citizen

CUTLINE: Kathleen Perkins, the new CEO at Breault Research Organization, with halogen lamps that the company makes.

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